

Feeling Sheepish
John 10:11-18
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Kory Wilcoxson

I heard my former pastor, David Shirey, preach on this passage once, and he asked this question: “The Lord is my shepherd. Jesus said, ‘I am the good shepherd.’ Does that mean we’re sheep?” I’m not sure I like that very much. What do you think of when you get an image in your head of a sheep? I think of the 4-H Fairs back in southern Indiana, walking along the straw-covered floor and looking at pen after pen of slobbering, smelly, animals who were only good for making two things: wool and a lot of noise. That’s not how I like to think of myself.

But the image of God and Jesus as shepherds is pervasive throughout the Bible, probably because that imagery would have been familiar in those times. We heard one of the most famous psalms, Psalm 23, and how it uses this imagery. Moses and David, two of the most prominent figures in the Hebrew scriptures, were shepherds. Listen to what the prophet Ezekiel writes, and how it compares to both Psalm 23 and Jesus’ words: “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

Likewise, Psalm 100 says, “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”

Jesus picks up on this shepherd language as well in the gospels. In both Matthew and Luke’s gospel, he describes himself as the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the lost one. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus looked with pity upon the people because they were “as sheep without a shepherd.” He told his disciples that when he was struck down, the sheep would be scattered. And when he appeared to them after the resurrection, the last words Jesus speaks in John’s gospel to Peter are, “Feed my sheep.”

So I think the Bible’s pretty clear on this one: we’re sheep. And that means if we’re sheep, we are not the shepherd. We don’t tend the flock; we are the flock. We aren’t the ones leading the sheep; we’re the ones following the shepherd.

That idea doesn’t sit too well in our world today. Being a follower isn’t made to be a very glamorous position. It reminds me of a cartoon I once saw. It showed a team of sled-dogs in their harnesses, pulling the sled, all of them facing the rear of the tail-wagging lead dog. The caption read, “If you’re not the lead dog, the view never changes.”

In our world there is an overwhelming focus on the art of leadership and an underwhelming focus on the practice of followership. Everyone wants to be a shepherd; no one wants to be a sheep. How many times have you been offered the opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? How many good books have you read lately on how to follow an effective leader? Nobody dreams big dreams about being a follower. Nobody wants to grow up to be a sheep. The last church I served in seminary

was embroiled in conflict for this specific reason: everybody wanted to lead and no one wanted to follow.

But as we've seen, scripture is clear: we are all followers of the Good Shepherd. You know, if we really wanted to be the shepherd, we could. The job description is laid out for us right there in the Bible. The qualifications for being a good shepherd are simple – you must be crucified, die, and rise again in three days. If you can do that, you've got the job. Otherwise, you're a sheep, and it's your job to act like one.

As I read this passage from Jesus, he seems to boil down the responsibilities of a sheep to two things: stay with the flock, and listen for the shepherd's voice. That's it, really. If sheep do those two things, then the shepherd can guarantee them protection. The good shepherd is even willing to lay down his life for the sheep, but he can only do that if we stay in the flock and follow his lead.

It doesn't sound like a lot of fun to simply be part of the flock, does it? Who wants to be just go along with the crowd? This country was built on the foundation of rugged individualism and not doing what the King told us to do, and that mindset is still prevalent today. Just about every TV commercial we see tells us that if we want to be unique, we should join the millions of other people who use this product. A remember seeing a bumper sticker that said, "Be a non-conformist – just like everyone else." Someone has tried to sell us on the importance of individuality, and we've bought it.

But the reality is that we cannot survive without community. If a sheep became isolated, it became vulnerable to attack because it wasn't protected by the flock. There's no such thing as a solitary sheep, and there's no such thing as an individual Christian. We are not religious individuals who happen to be members of a particular community; we are a community first, made up of individuals. The community precedes and is the means of grace for each of us. Would this place hold the same meaning for us if we each had our own individual worship services? As sheep, we must be part of the flock, which means putting ourselves with our fellow sheep on a regular basis by worshipping together and serving together and just being together.

Being with the flock makes it easier to hear the shepherd's voice, because more ears are tuned to that frequency. Being able to recognize the shepherd's voice was crucial to the survival of the flock. In Jesus' time, several shepherds would use the same watering hole, and often they would all arrive with their flocks at the same time. The gathering became one big flock of thirsty sheep. But they were never worried about getting their sheep mixed up. When one shepherd was ready to leave, he'd make distinctive sound – a whistle, a cluck of the tongue – and his sheep would begin to separate themselves from the larger group, because they recognized their master's voice.

We hear a lot of voices in our lives. Too many, probably. David Shirey asked this question: "Of all the voices which call out to you to pay attention, can you discern from among them the voice of the Good Shepherd? Think of all the voices: some attractive and alluring like advertisers, some loud and boisterous like radio and TV personalities; some rational and persuasive like authors and editorial writers. Add to those the voices of friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors, and you end up with a cacophony of different voices vying for your attention, wanting to lead you along. Can you distinguish the voice of the Good Shepherd?"

One of the founders of our denomination, Alexander Campbell, talked about how important it was for Christians to come within an "understanding distance" of God's

word. The more time we spend with God, the closer we come to an understanding distance, and the more easily we recognize the sound of his voice in our lives. It's so important that we be able to distinguish between the voice of God and the howl of the wolves. Our lives depend on it.

There's one more thing about being a sheep that I need to mention. Jesus says in verse 14, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep." Of course he does, he's Jesus! But think about that: he knows us. He knows us. How many people can you say really know you? How many people can look at you and call you by your name? This is a big deal in today's anonymous world where we are more often referred to by our social security number or driver's license number or our credit card number. Half my mail is either addressed to Cary Wilkerson or "Resident." We live in an age where we have increasingly sophisticated communication devices but so little actual, substantial communication. How many people really know our name?

The church – the flock – is called to follow the lead of our shepherd and be a place where people are known and called by name. Remember the Cheers television theme? "Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name; and they're always glad you came." Those words might describe a bar, but I'd rather they described the church..

We are called to know each other, because we are all a part of the same flock, under the care of the same shepherd. More sheep are coming through the gates; Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them in also." And when he does, we must welcome them by name and make space for them in our pen. We must show them what it means to follow.

We are the sheep, called to be part of the flock and follow the master's voice. We are sheep. Can I get a "B-a-a?" The Lord is our shepherd, and he is a good shepherd, someone who cares enough to protect us when we are in need and loving enough to find us when we are lost. May we be God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.